

Inclusion vs. Exclusion: the Sprinter's Dilemma

Ironman, Robocop and Cyborg—they are classical superheroes I have admired since early childhood. I thought it was cool that they can shoot lasers out of their palm or turn their arms into machine guns; with the iron armor, they can even survive the hit of bullets and bombs. In terms of ability, they are super-humans, the fittest individuals on Earth. Because their super abilities grasp our attention, it is often difficult to focus on the fact that under the iron armor are vulnerable human bodies that could not sustain their lives without the aid of technology.

Anthony Stark is badly injured before he becomes Ironman; police officer Alex J. Murphy is brutally murdered before he was recreated as Robocop; and Victor Stone is a victim of a scientific experiment, and is made into a half human and half machine Cyborg in order to stay alive. What is so interesting is that before these characters become overly-able, they were all disabled in some way. It is technology that gives them their abilities, and it is their abilities that prevent them from being disabled. Looking at it from a biological perspective, it seems that ability is the key factor which determines whether an individual is “fit”, “unfit” or the “fittest” within the human species. However, using ability to categorize individuals in a society can be very problematic. It leads to prejudice, exclusion, and social injustices which are justified by the historical misrepresentation of being weaker, flawed, and deficient. This categorization of individuals based on physical abilities is biased and needs to be reassessed specifically in light of the fact that physical abilities can be modified by modern technology. **The categories of fit, unfit, and fittest with regard to physical abilities have been largely disrupted and blurred in the process of human evolution; furthermore, the continued use of such categorization is a fundamental problem that theories of critical disability studies can attend to.**

We do have a real-life version of the overly-abled comic book superheroes—Oscar Pistorius, even though some might consider his story less dramatic than the comic stories. Oscar Pistorius is an amputee sprinter from South Africa, who was also known as the "Blade Runner" (*New York Times*). Pistorius uses prosthetics that consist of J shaped blades, called the "Cheetahs." The "Cheetahs" not only give Pistorius the ability to run, but also make him "overly-able" as reporter Jere Longman notes in it in his *New York Times* article. Pistorius was eager to take part in the 2008 summer Olympic Games; however, he was denied the right to participate because he is considered "overly-able."

A scientific study by the International Association of Athletics Federations (the I.A.A.F.) that tested Pistorius' prosthetics showed that the "Cheetahs" give Pistorius an unfair advantage over the other athletes (Longman). A report by Professor Peter Brueggemann from the German Sports University suggests that Pistorius was able to run at the same speed as able-bodied sprinters with about "25 percent less energy expenditure" (Robinson). Contrary to the I.A.A.F., Brueggemann notes that the lower energy expenditure "did not necessarily translate to be a general advantage" (Robinson). Pistorius's agent Peet Van Zyl also said that "... there were too many variables that weren't considered and that more testing should be done" (Robinson). The debate of whether Pistorius has an "unfair" advantage over the others, and whether he is "overly-able" has no easy answer. The analysis of the I.A.A.F. which deemed him overly-able seems less convincing after considering the other sides. If the I.A.A.F.'s results are, however, accurate, it does seem reasonable to exclude Pistorius from the Olympics since he has an advantage over the other athletes. Letting him run the race would be similar to letting one of the super-heroes race ordinary men. Many might argue that his participation is unfair to other athletes; but on the other hand, does denying the civil rights of people with disabilities make it

less “unfair”? Disability activists like Paul K. Longmore claim that people with disabilities have been fighting for equality and inclusion for decades, if not longer. Is it fair that our society continuously excludes people with disabilities? This issue of inclusion and exclusion is indeed a dilemma.

Robert Gailey, an associate professor of physical therapy at the University of Miami Medical School, however, approaches the debate from a new angle, which challenges the I.A.A.F.’s position. Gailey asked: “Are they [the I.A.A.F.] looking at not having an unfair advantage? Or are they discriminating because of the purity of the Olympics, because they don’t want to see a disabled man line up against an able-bodied man for fear that if the person who doesn’t have the perfect body wins, what does that say about the image of Man?” (Longman). Gailey thinks that the I.A.A.F.’s decision is primarily about the image of people with disabilities in terms of the notion that images of disability might negatively impact the ideal, pure image of bodily perfection that the Olympics attempts to display and maintain.

As we all have experienced in daily life, images of disabilities—and what the Olympics might consider “imperfection”—are often absent in our culture because people with disabilities have traditionally been misrepresented in and excluded from the public. When we watch sports games on TV, it is difficult to find disabled players; when we send the spacecraft Pioneer 10 into space, the human image on the Pioneer Plaque is an able-bodied male and female but not people with disabilities or people with bodies that don’t live up to the imagined ideal; when we watch a fashion show, the models that represent beauty are predominantly able-bodied. The information society tells us is that able-bodied means power and beauty; able-bodied represents the image of a human, but disabled people are in some way deficient. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, a disability rights activist and a disabled person herself, claims that “Our society emphatically

denies vulnerability, contingency, and mortality. Modernity pressures us relentlessly toward standardizing bodies, a goal that is now largely accomplishable in the developed world through technological and medical interventions that materially rationalize our bodies under the banner of progress and improvement” (524). Garland-Thomson points out that this social value, on one hand, worships the image of the standardized able-body, and on the other hand, depreciates the image of disabilities, and pushes it to the opposite and thereby devalued extreme.

Are images of disabilities less favorable compared to standard able-bodied images? As biologists may explain, the standard human body is the result of natural selection, in which individuals with gene that have favorable phenotypes are more likely to survive and reproduce than those with less favorable phenotypes (Brooker, 9). As classical Darwinians like to put it, natural selection is simply the “survival of the fittest.” In this case, people with disabilities may be considered as unfit individuals and able-bodied individuals are on the contrary, the fittest. People with disabilities therefore are oppressed and subject to the power of the fittest and to the power of natural selection. However, the prominence of Pistorius’ case disrupts these categorizations based on the law of biology. What category does Pistorius belong to? Because he is disabled, our initial reaction is that he should be unfit. But if we realize he is the real-life-version of a comic book superhero because the use of the “Cheetahs” makes him overly-able, shouldn’t he also be in the category of the fittest?

I can not help but think of the movie *X-Men*, in which the characters encounter situations similar to those Pistorius is facing. *X-Men* is about Mutants who are people undergoing genetic mutations that result in their developing extraordinary powers that “normal” people don’t have. They are super-humans in terms of their abilities; thus, they must fit in to the category of the fittest. But ironically, our society regards mutation as a disease, such as Down Syndrome, the

mutation of chromosome #21 or Turner Syndrome, the mutation of sex chromosomes. Under the influence of the medical model, society views Mutants as “unfit.” In *X-Men*, Mutants are discriminated against and segregated from society. Society considers them to be sick, and in order for them to re-integrate into society, the only choice they have is to be “cured.” Garland-Thomson asserts in her article “Disability and Representation” that it is misinterpretation of images of disability that lead to social injustices for people with disabilities. This misinterpretation is exactly what occurs in the case Oscar Pistorius. Garland-Thomson might argue that it is the misinterpretation of Pistorius’ image and the image of the Olympics as displaying the “ideal” Man that results in Pistorius’ exclusion.

While comics or movies are indeed fictional, they are sometimes the reflection of real issues that exist in our society. The movie *X-Men* shows that the fittest and the unfit categories based on biological theory are in fact self-contradictory and misrepresentative. Stanton A. Coblenz, a writer known for his criticism of historical subjects, states in his article “The Survival of The Unfit,” that “since the stage of nature presents a continuous struggle for ‘the survival of the fittest,’ it is the unfit type, like the unfit individual, that is eliminated; and one might not without reason inquire whether, among men, the process has not been reversed, so that it is the unfit that are perpetuated” (164). Coblenz believes that since we have little question of survival in our society, the unfit individuals can survive along with the fittest. Natural selection in the human species does not necessarily function similarly to that of other animals. So the fittest and unfit categories become relatively insignificant. We realize that human society is very different from nature. But does that then mean that natural law does not apply to human society?

We must consider that Darwin’s law of natural selection was not originally designed for humans. A more relevant theory would be Social Darwinism, which was adopted from Darwin’s

concept of evolution and applied to social perspectives by Herbert Spencer, a social philosopher. Social Darwinism views “...peoples of the world as two populations, one of which was superior to the other by reason of physical and mental characteristics” (Tobach, 99). While we have the disabilities rights movement, which is a movement that values disabilities as forms of variation, contrary to that is the eugenics movement, which bases its principle on Social Darwinism. But while Social Darwinism believes that active human intervention in the evolutionary process of natural selection can improve the human species (Tobach, 100), the eugenics movement aims to raise the physical and mental level of the race by encouraging the fittest phenotypes to exist (Jones, 99). Although eugenicists might not always speak of “unfit” individuals, the idea of eugenics itself attacks indirectly anyone who is unfit.

Despite the fact that Social Darwinism has been put into practice throughout different historical periods, the validity of this concept has been questioned and criticized widely. One demonstration is the Holocaust in Nazi Germany, which was implemented and sustained by the idea of eugenics. A German Darwinist Ernst Haeckel noted, before the raise of Nazi Germany, that “the theory of selection teaches that in human life, and in animal and plant life,...only a small and chosen minority can exist and flourish...This principle of selection is as far as possible from democratic; on the contrary it is aristocratic in the strictest sense of the word” (Barnett, 158). Haeckel thinks that the condition for the survival of a human race is equally cruel as compared to that of animal species in the nature. So in order for the Germans to survive under the law of selection, the Germans have to be the fittest among all human races. In his book *Biology and Freedom*, Samuel A. Barnett affirms that the central presumption of Nazi Germany was that the White, Germanic races are superior to other races in the world, and “the superior whites were threatened by intermarriage with black and yellow races” (Barnett, 159). The desires

of betterment of the Germanic race lead to the massive persecution and genocide of the so called “unfit” individuals, which includes people with disabilities. But, in fact, there are no scientific studies accurate enough to prove the Germanic race to be genetically superior to the others. In terms of eugenics and the holocaust, definitions of fit and unfit can only be vaguely understood because too many factors function as variables. Although the holocaust happened almost 70 years ago, the barriers between physical fitness today have become especially difficult to define since technology in modern society has complicated the definition of ability. Pistorius is a great example--he may have been persecuted in Nazi Germany because he is disabled, but he may also have been heroicized since technology has made him overly-abled. The distinction between fit and unfit is no longer easily identifiable.

The tragedy of the holocaust reminds us of our current social structure, which also operates under the principle of eugenics, even though in a less extreme scale. Instead of persecution, our society has segregation and exclusion of people with disabilities. For example, our society views technical aids as violations in sports, while amputee runners view aids as required for walking and running. Some may argue that if technical aids are allowed, the nature of sports would be altered, and it will no longer be a competition of the physical limits of humans but rather a race of technology. This would mean that to an agency like the I.A.A.F., Pistorius is destroying the purity and integrity of sports. It is quite clear that what limits Pistorius is not his physical difference, but our social restrictions. Or we can say that Pistorius is fit in a biological way, but in this case he can not quite fit into the Olympic Games because of our social structure. Although the rules have been set since the early history of sports, technological advances are forcing us to rethink the rules. Pistorius himself argues, “I feel that it is my responsibility, on behalf of myself and all other disabled athletes, to stand firmly and not allow

one organization to inhibit our ability to compete using the very tools without which we simply cannot walk, let alone run..." (Robinson). What determines the limits of technical aid? The fact that the use of prosthetics was restricted in the past should not **necessarily** lead to the restriction of prosthetics in the future.

The case of Pistorius makes us realize that we have a problematic social structure, which in turn leads to Pistorius's dilemma—inclusion or exclusion. Under the political push of the disability rights movement, we can no longer ignore the existence of such problems. Despite the resistance from different directions, our society is in fact capable of change, and so are the rules of sports. There are always exceptions to the rules because rules are not set in stone. They have been evolving and modified throughout history. Women, for example, were not allowed to participate in the Olympic Games in ancient Greece, but this rule was changed in the 1900s. The same changes or inclusions could and should be made for people with disabilities.

Simi Linton writes in her article "What Is Disability Studies?" that we should "weave disabled people back into the fabric of society, thread by thread, theory by theory" (518). Linton points out that the "traditional curriculum and existing courses" focus on changing individuals of disability to fit into current social structure. But, she argues, we should focus more on changing society, so people with disabilities can be included. This is a very important point that our society is missing. If we take a look at Pistorius' case again, we can see why Pistorius was and is still viewed with chagrin by some because he challenged the social norm. But change is not necessarily a bad thing. I see it as an opportunity for our society to transform itself into a more hospitable place that values variation and humanity.

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